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THE REAPER AND THE HARVEST

The topic for consideration, The Reaper and the Harvest, is one that is relevant to the times we live in, and they are dreadful times. The two main sets of scriptures that will be referred to are found in Matthew 13:24-30, 37-43 and Revelation 14:14-19 where Jesus tells us about the parable of the wheat and tares, and the Apostle John tells us of his vision of the harvest of the earth. All references are from the King James Version, unless otherwise stated.

Matt.13: “²⁴And another parable put he forth unto them saying, The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field: ²⁵But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way. ²⁶But when the blade was sprung up and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. ²⁷So the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst not thou sow good seed in thy field? from whence then hath it tares? ²⁸He said unto them, An enemy hath done this. The servants said unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? ²⁹But he said, Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares ye root up also the wheat with them. ³⁰Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat unto my barn.”

Matt.13: “³⁷He that soweth the good seed is the Son of man. ³⁸The field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of the wicked one; ³⁹The enemy that sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels. ⁴⁰As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world. ⁴¹The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend and them which do iniquity; ⁴²And shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.”

Rev.14: “¹⁴And I looked, and behold a white cloud, and upon the cloud one sat like unto the Son of man,

having on his head a golden crown, and in his hand a sharp sickle. ¹⁵And another angel came out of the temple, crying with a loud voice to him that sat on the cloud, Thrust in thy sickle and reap: for the time is come for thee to reap; for the harvest of the earth is ripe. ¹⁶And he that sat on the cloud thrust in his sickle on the earth; and the earth was reaped. ¹⁷And another angel came out of the temple which is in heaven, he also having a sharp sickle. ¹⁸And another angel came out from the altar, which had power over fire; and cried with a loud cry to him that had the sharp sickle, saying, Thrust in thy sharp sickle, and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth; for her grapes are fully ripe. ¹⁹And the angel thrust in his sickle into the earth, and gathered the vine of the earth, and cast it into the great winepress of the wrath of God.”

The first question that naturally arises from these two sets of scriptures is, **Are they talking about the same events?** The mere fact that both talk about a harvest, does not mean that they are talking about the same harvest. A harvest, both in literal and symbolic usage, applies to the activity of gathering in the fruitage of a period of growth. The scriptures talk about three major harvest works since God has been dealing with human nations. We find these works of harvest at the ends of the Jewish Age, the Gospel Age, and the Millennial Age. The harvest work in each occurs on the basis of whether groups of individuals have developed sufficiently to act on God's truth and principles. John the Baptist tells us about the harvest of the Jewish Age – a separation of wheat from chaff. These symbolise the 'Israelites indeed' and the false 'nominal Israelites' respectively. They were separated on the basis of whether or not they recognised Jesus as the Christ, their long-awaited Messiah, the Anointed of God. Jesus brought this truth to the Jewish nation. He

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was the chief reaper in this work and was present during the Jewish Age harvest. We note that the separating work occurred on the basis of the truth that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God.

We know that there are important parallels between the Jewish Age and the Gospel Age. These parallels also extend to the harvest periods of both Ages. We would expect this since we note that both of these harvests gathered fruit that is intended for the seed of blessing, the Abrahamic promise, the long-promised seed that will bless all nations of the earth during the Millennium. We note that the early church was purely Jewish. The same call went to the Gentiles, although later. As the call to the Gentiles was later, so the Gentile harvest was also to be later. The Gospel Age harvest is talked about as though it is a separation of wheat from tares. This will be discussed subsequently. The final separation occurs at the end of the Millennium, a separation of sheep from goats. The sheep are set on the right hand of the shepherd and the goats are set on the left hand of the shepherd. The sheep inherit the kingdom prepared from the foundation of the world, (Matt. 25:34) while the goats are consigned to everlasting destruction, symbolised by fire, prepared for the devil and his angels. We note that this millennial separation work is quite different to that of the Gospel and Jewish Ages. Here God is dealing with the world rather than a selected few. What is more, even though the separation of the sheep and goats is conceptually a type of harvest, the actual word is not used scripturally in connection with it. This may also indicate the fundamental difference between it and the scriptural harvest periods at the end of the Jewish and Gospel Ages. So how do we work out what period or periods the harvest in the parable of the wheat and tares and the vision of John apply to?

We notice in **the parable of the wheat and tares** Jesus helps us by telling us in verse 39 that the harvest is the end of the world. Also in verse 40 – ‘As therefore the tares are gathered and are burned in the fire, so shall it be in the end of this world’. The Diaglott renders the phrase in verse 39 as ‘the end harvest’ and the one in verse 40 as ‘so will it be in the end of the Age’. The Diaglott seems to make it clear that the harvesting, the gathering and burning of the tares occurs during the time at the end of this Age. The word translated ‘end’ here we are familiar with. It is the Greek word ‘suentelia’ meaning not a point in time as the Greek word ‘telos’ but a period of time when there is a bringing together of important events. The word ‘end’ does not really do the original Greek word justice and a more accurate translation would be ‘consummation’ or ‘completion’ (from Vines). But at the end of what Age are these features occurring?

There are several important clues that help with the

answer:

1. We know that the field is the world. A field is the ground in which the seed is sown and out of which the wheat and tares grow. The wheat and tares are therefore not the world but come or grow out of the world. We know that the word ‘world’ is basically the right translation since it is a translation of the Greek word ‘aion’ which we are familiar with, meaning “an age”. So these two groups, the wheat and tares, come out of the world or are selected, so to speak, out of the world. This suggests that the age talked about cannot be the Millennial Age since in the kingdom the whole world will be dealt with rather than a selected part.

2. Jesus tells us in verse 39 that the enemy who sowed the tares is the devil. We know that the devil is bound and therefore incapacitated during the Millennial Age. This in itself would exclude the parable being set in the Millennial reign of Jesus and His body members.

3. We are told that after the harvest and the burning of the tares the righteous shall shine as the sun. This occurs after the statement that ‘all things that offend and them which do iniquity and shall cast them into a furnace of fire’ has been fulfilled. It is in the Millennial Age that the righteous shall shine as the sun, and we note that this comes after the harvest and the destruction of the tares. This would put the parable in the Gospel Age and the timing of the harvest and the destruction of the tares at the end of the Gospel Age. It is interesting to note the sequence of events here that straddle the junction of the Gospel and Millennial Ages, namely, harvest, destruction, followed by righteousness.

We also need to be clear that the harvest of the Gospel Age is being talked about in these two passages rather than the harvest of the Jewish Age. The most important point distinguishing the Jewish and Gospel Age harvests is that the former related to the house of Israel and the latter to the whole earth or world. During the Jewish Age God dealt only with the nation of Israel. Israel was the only nation that He ‘knew’. During His first advent, Jesus exclusively dealt with and sifted that nation, the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Despite coming unto His own, His own received Him not, as we know, but to the few that received Him He gave power to become the sons of God (John 1:11,12). As a nation, Israel rejected Jesus and consequently Israel’s house was left desolate. This distinguishes the harvest talked about in the parable of the wheat and tares and the vision of John from the Jewish Age harvest of wheat from chaff.

But is **John’s vision of the harvest of the earth** in Revelation 14 referring to the same time and event as the harvest of the parable of the wheat and tares? The

verses in Revelation 14 preceding the harvest of the earth set the context, namely, the contrasting works and faith of the true and false followers of Jesus. This fits in nicely with the subjects and the timing of the harvest of the wheat and tares. The wheat and tares represent the true and false followers respectively. They are the fruit of the seed sown by the Son of Man and that sown by the devil. This suggests that the subject and time of the two passages is similar. We also notice that verse 13 which immediately precedes the vision of John refers to a particular phase at the end of the Gospel Age which is associated with the blessed fate of those that die in the Lord at that time, and this is because they rest from their labours and their works follow them. This appears to be a reference to those saints that will not sleep in death but be transformed in the twinkling of an eye as mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:51-52. A more detailed account of this is given in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-18.

We note, then, that those referred to in Revelation 14:13 whose works follow them, do not sleep in death and are united together with those who have already been raised by Jesus. Verse 15 tells us that this event occurs during the Lord's return or parousia. Not only that. It also appears that this event is associated with the early phase of His return for it is associated with His actual coming down from heaven, which of necessity would be at the beginning of the parousia. Therefore, the context of John's vision in regards to the preceding verses in Revelation 14 would suggest that the vision relates to similar events and a similar time to that of the harvest of the wheat and the tares. Further evidence for this is provided by the association between the Gospel Age harvest and the return of our Lord given in Matthew chapter 24 when His disciples asked Jesus concerning the signs of these two events. Jesus confirms the association by giving the signs without any sort of separation. This suggests that Jesus' view on the matter was the same. In fact, it is likely that Jesus had given this thought to them originally.

This same association between the harvest and our Lord's presence is shown again in John's vision. The one 'like unto the Son of man' is the one with the sharp sickle who reaps the earth. The one like unto the Son of man is identified for us in the vision of the seven candlesticks in Revelation chapter 1 as Jesus. Jesus is the first and the last, the one that liveth and was dead and is alive forever more. Confirmation of the identity of 'the one like unto the Son of man' as Jesus is given by Him in wearing a golden crown, a sign of Jesus' divine, regal authority. Daniel 7:13 also mentions this 'one like unto the Son of man'. Again Jesus seems to be suggested by this term. It was only Jesus who entered into the presence of God and was

given authority, glory and sovereign or regal power. Given that this 'one like unto the Son of man' is Jesus and that it is He who reaps the earth, then it would seem reasonable that He has returned to perform this important work. This would again reinforce the thought that the harvest of the earth occurs during Jesus' parousia at the end of the Gospel Age.

We have already noted **the sequence of events** in relation to the latter features of the parable of the wheat and tares, namely, harvest, destruction followed by righteousness. John's vision emphasizes the first two elements. John's vision actually deals with two harvests – the harvest of the earth and also the harvest of the vine of the earth. In relation to the vision of the harvest of the earth, this occurs first followed by the harvest of the vine of the earth. The latter is used in the great winepress of the wrath of God. Rev.19:15 tells us that the winepress of the wrath of God is part of the process needed to subjugate the nations to usher in the kingdom of God. We note that it is the fruitage of the vine that is used to produce the wine of God's wrath. This is the result of man's efforts during the Gospel Age. Man's efforts under the guidance of Satan can only lead to the necessary destructive intervention by God Almighty. The consequences of fallen man's efforts and the righteous intervention by God merge into the one same outcome. During the last plague all the nations have been gathered to Armageddon. God especially remembers great Babylon and to give unto her this cup of the fierceness of His wrath.

In the parable of the wheat and tares, the same event is shown by the burning of the tares, which symbolizes the destruction of a false counterfeit Christian system. Babylon and the nations make up the present heavens and earth, which Peter tells us are reserved for destruction by fire (2 Peter 3:7). The symbol of fire highlights the destructive element of the cup of the wine of the fierceness of God's wrath. Both civil governments, symbolized by islands and mountains, and religious elements are destroyed when the plagues reach their climax in the seventh plague. So we again see the elements of harvest followed by destruction, which again suggests the two visions are talking about the same events and the same timing.

Having laid the groundwork concerning the inter-relatedness of the two divisions, we would now like to explore some issues that these two sets of verses highlight. The first and main issue is that of the relationship between **the harvest and the Second Advent of Jesus**. We note that the 'one like unto the Son of man' is present throughout John's vision and we have already seen that both John and Daniel identify the 'one like unto the Son of man' as Jesus. It is, then, Jesus who reaps the earth. It appears He is

directing the work of the harvest at the end of the Age. It appears in the parable of the wheat and the tares that Jesus tells us the reapers are the angels, and this suggests the harvest is an extensive work with Jesus supervising it. But is Jesus literally present? If He is, this would imply that He had returned and that the harvest work was another sign of His return. John's vision is, of course, highly symbolic. We do not expect to see Jesus literally on a white cloud reaping the earth with a literal sickle. In fact, it would probably be nigh impossible to describe Jesus in any symbolic picture form given His glorious present divine form. Jesus now has inherent self-sustaining life, inhabiting the divine nature. This nature, we believe, is the same nature as God, and we know that no man can see God and live. There is, therefore, a fundamental incompatibility between the human and divine natures. A human cannot apprehend the divine nature according to any of the normal human senses, and this is probably why the expression 'like unto the Son of Man' is used.

The term 'the Son of Man' is used extensively elsewhere in the scriptures to refer to Jesus but we note that these instances are not part of a vision that is attempting to describe Him in picture form. If the question "Is Jesus literally present?" refers to whether humans could see Him with the sense of sight, then we would have great difficulty answering the question in a vision such as John's, which we have already noted is highly symbolic and therefore by definition we cannot answer. So when we ask if Jesus is literally present in association with the earth during the harvest in John's vision, we actually mean has He returned in His immaterial divine nature to the environs of the earth as He said He would? The literalness refers not to whether humans will see Him literally with their eyes, which we understand they will not, but to His actual return and presence in the earth to take the reigns of His kingdom. This is to some extent a difficulty because we don't have a clear understanding of what it means for a spiritual being to be on the earth or associated with the earth. It is difficult to answer questions which arise such as, Do spiritual beings inhabit any or all of the physical dimensions we are familiar with? And if not, in what way do we say they are **on** the earth or associated **with** the earth? To some extent we have to accept that we cannot answer these sorts of questions adequately at present and put them to the side. This is largely due to our poor understanding of spiritual natures. We have to accept at face value that when Jesus said that the heavens would retain Him until His return, it makes sense even though we may not fully understand that sense. Understanding this means that we can glean clues from John's vision and the parable of the wheat and tares about whether Jesus is present on the earth or associated with it.

1. The first clue is that Jesus has a golden crown in John's vision. This suggests that He has obtained divine regal authority and is exercising it when He is reaping the earth. The two symbols of the sickle and Jesus wearing the golden crown are significant. It is significant that the facts that Jesus is wearing a golden crown as He reaps the earth are placed together. We know that Jesus returns as King, gradually subjugating the nations after rewarding His people. Jesus had to leave the earth and enter into the very presence of God Himself to receive for Himself the divine right to the kingdom. This is what the golden crown symbolizes, namely, the divine right to the kingdom. Having received it, He returns to claim it and to set it up. We notice what Luke 19:12 says. Jesus, of course, did not receive the actual kingdom in heaven but the divine right to it. We notice here the important principle that the right to the kingdom is obtained before the kingdom is set up. This is why Jesus can be pictured rightfully showing His right to the kingdom without the kingdom being set up yet.

This setting up of the kingdom, of course, takes some time. This is shown in Daniel's prophecy in Dan.2:44. In Nebuchadnezzar's vision we note that the stone that would smite the great image and destroy it had to be fashioned and present first. The stone represents the kingdom in its formative stage, represented by the returned Lord who has received divine right to the kingdom. He will then rule the nations of the earth with a rod of iron. This involves a further stage in the exercise of Jesus' divine right to the kingdom. In the ultimate exercise of His divine right to the kingdom, Jesus will destroy every enemy and the last enemy to be destroyed is death. Therefore, the fact that Jesus is pictured in John's vision wearing a golden crown whilst reaping suggests that He is exercising His divine right to the kingdom, and this is associated with the early phases of His Second Advent.

2. The second clue that Jesus has returned during the time of the harvest of the wheat is given by the phrase 'But gather the wheat into my barn' in the parable of the wheat and tares. The wheat, we know, symbolizes the true followers of Jesus. Gathering them into the barn suggests that they are rewarded and given habitation in God's house, where we know there are many dwelling places. This was promised by Jesus himself and that this would be associated with His return. Jesus said 'I will come again and will take you to myself; that where I am, there ye may be also' (John 14:3). This association between the return of Jesus and the rewarding with life to Jesus' followers is made even clearer by the Apostle Paul. Paul tells us that the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout 'and the dead in Christ shall rise first, then we which are alive and remain shall be

caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord' (1 Thess.4:16,17). This is the same event that Jesus promised to His followers. This shows us that a very important work during Jesus' Second Advent is the gathering to Himself of His people. This correlates with the final phases of the harvest's visions, particularly the gathering of the wheat into the Lord's barn. This particular aspect refers specifically to the resurrection of the Lord's people. This is part of the same overall process of the returned Lord receiving His people unto himself. Therefore the harvest time, which is a separating and ingathering work of Jesus' followers, suggests that Jesus has returned and is supervising this important work.

3. Another point that suggests Jesus has returned during this reaping is shown by His sitting on a white cloud (Rev.14:14). We remember that Jesus' ascension to heaven occurred as a cloud received Him out of their sight (Acts 1:9), and as the apostles gazed up into heaven they were told that Jesus would return in like manner. This in itself would raise the possibility that Jesus had returned. More important is the fact that clouds are frequently associated with the wrath of God during the great Day of the Lord, and this is one of the last features associated with our Lord's return prior to the establishment of the kingdom. This has already been alluded to in the vision of Nebuchadnezzar where the stone strikes the feet of the image, leading to its destruction. The wrath of God during the great Day of the Lord is symbolized by the great winepress in John's vision. Jesus' return is associated with these clouds of trouble. These clouds are associated with God's judgment upon the present heavens and earth, and as a generalization clouds appear to symbolize judgments. Eventually the powers of this Age will be destroyed and man's pride, arrogance and selfishness will be swept aside (Zeph.1:15-18). This will allow man, including and especially the nation of Israel, to see Him and His righteous reign. In John's vision the cloud Jesus sits on is a white cloud. This suggests a righteous element is associated with this particular judgment. This would be consistent with the thought that Jesus' followers are rewarded justly for their faithful testimony throughout the Age. Therefore, the fact that John's vision refers to Jesus sitting on a cloud also suggests that He has returned to the earth during this harvest.

4. Another clue that this harvest is associated with the return of our Lord is the symbol of the sickle. The sickle is what does the harvesting, and this includes separating the wheat from the tares. It has been suggested and it is usually taken for granted that the sickle symbolizes truth. Because the scriptures give us few direct clues to the link between sickle and truth, we need to ask what is it that separates the wheat from

the tares? In other words, what separates the true followers of Jesus from the false followers of Jesus. We know that the true followers of Jesus have heard the call and separated themselves from the confusion of Babylon. Babylon primarily means 'confusion'. Confusion stands opposed to reason, reasonableness and order, and these are hallmarks of truth. It seems reasonable that the truth, and in particular present truth, is the primary force in this separation. It is the Word of God, the truth that discerns the very thoughts and intents of the heart. Those endowed with keen sight like the eagle will be gathered around the 'meat in due season' dispensed by the Lord.

It has already been mentioned that there are important parallels between the Gospel and Jewish Ages. It was the truth that separated the 'Israelites indeed' from the false Israelites in the Jewish Age harvest. It was only a few that were taught by the Law and were brought by the truth to Jesus. It was only a few that could accept that Jesus was the Christ, the Anointed of God, the Messiah. Likewise then we can expect that it is the truth that does the separating of the true followers of Jesus from the false during the Gospel Age harvest. It seems reasonable then that the sickle which separates and harvests the wheat from the tares symbolizes truth, and more particularly present truth. However, how does this point to the presence of our Lord during the Gospel Age harvest?

It has already been mentioned that the keenly sighted eagles are gathered around the meat of present truth. We note that the preceding verses associate this with the Second Advent of our Lord. This association of the meat, the due season and the Second Advent of our Lord is made even clearer later in Matthew 24:26-28. We also note that the final destructive forces during the harvest period are not allowed to do their work till the servants of God have been sealed intellectually. This requires knowledge, which in turn requires truth. We are familiar with Daniel's 'time of the end' prophecies (Dan.12:1-4). The resurrection prophecies in verse 2 are set in the harvest time. 1 Thessalonians has already shown us that one of the first works, if not **the** first work, performed by Jesus when He descends from heaven is the raising to life those who are dead in Christ. These would correspond to those in Dan.12:2 who are referred to as 'those who shall awake to everlasting life'. In Dan.12:4 we note that this time is associated with the running to and fro and an increase in knowledge. In Amos 8:11,12 we find the phrase 'run to and fro' probably refers mainly to spiritual knowledge so that the harvest period is associated not just with a general increase in knowledge but also, and particularly, spiritual knowledge. This would tie in with the 'meat in due season' truth that the sickle used by Jesus in the harvest period symbolizes. Therefore, the fact that the sickle is used in the vision to John

links it to the known increase in spiritual knowledge associated with our Lord's Second Advent. This would again suggest that Jesus is present during this harvest period.

Conclusion: It would seem, then, that the clues given in John's vision, namely the sickle, the golden crown, the white cloud as well as the clues given in the parables of the wheat and tares such as the gathering of the wheat into the barn and the destruction of the tares all suggest that Jesus has returned personally and is directly supervising the harvest work. The last question that arises from these two sets of scriptures, having addressed the aforementioned points is, Are we living in the time of the harvest? If we can reasonably answer Yes, then we have another important sign suggesting that our Lord has returned and that we are indeed living in the days of the Son of Man. It has already been mentioned that the harvest time is a separation of the true and false followers of Jesus and that the separation occurs on the basis of truth, particularly present truth. Some of the basic tenets that we regard as truth include the ransom, restitution, the resurrection, the true nature of the soul and hellfire as well as God's plan for the whole world.

The critical question is, How long have these sickle truths been associated with the separation from the system of Babylon of confusion? The answer to this is really a matter of historical record. This time period stretches back over a century now. The rediscovery of these precious truths that we now often take for granted occurred in the middle and towards the end of the nineteenth century. This led to the dissemination of the sickle truths and the consequent separation quickly followed. This separation from false Christian systems on the basis of these truths is a harvest feature, which therefore suggests we are living in the time of the harvest and therefore in the days of the Son of Man.

In the spirit of open discussion this presentation has sought to explore this apparently important sign of Jesus' return. We do not usually speak about the sign when we discuss the signs of His return, and this is why it has been focussed on here in the hope that the points raised may be considered in the light of present truth.

May the Lord add His blessing.

(ES:04)

OUR HIGH PRIEST

When looking into the qualifications and status of our high Priest we need look no further than Hebrews. Let us start with Hebrews 4:14-16 "Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need." (KJV)

Let us take a few moments to look at the reason for the writing of the epistle to the Hebrews, the lessons that were intended for them and of course their application to those who follow Christ to-day. It was written to the Hebrew people as James puts it in his epistle in James 1:1 "To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings." (NIV) But more especially it was to those who had come to accept Christ as their Saviour and thus were "Israelites indeed" as well as to those amongst the Gentiles who have been "grafted" into the promises of God to Abraham by union with Christ, the true and faithful seed.

To appreciate the reason for the book of Hebrews, and the great understanding that it can bring to us about Christ in his role as the high priest we must mentally take a step back to when it was written, and get our

orientation as though we were living under those conditions. The question of the Law Covenant was a burning issue in the Early Church, not only to the Hebrews, but also to the Gentiles, many of whom came under the influence of the Hebrew followers. It seemed, especially to the Hebrews, impossible that the Law Covenant was no longer necessary and that the Gentiles were to gain access to the Abrahamic covenant through Christ. It was written for the purpose of counteracting the powerful error of the day that the Law covenant was still in operation and their tenacious adherence to it. To many it had a dominating influence from which they were having great difficulty freeing themselves. The Epistle was written to prove to them that a totally new dispensation of grace and not of works had been ushered in through Jesus at Pentecost.

It was not written to the Jews, with the intention of converting those who did not believe in Christ, but to the Hebrews, those who were the children of Abraham in the true sense, who had accepted Christ, not those who were Jews by birthright only. The aim of the apostle was to strengthen and establish their faith, to acknowledge God's dealings with Israel, and also to show how the new dispensation provided a new and living way of access to God, their Heavenly Father.

Paul reminds them in Heb 1:1-3 "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many

times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven." (NIV) Thus he was showing them the connection with the Old Testament prophets, their purpose in bringing God's word to the Israelites and how God finally sent his Son to them to bring them back to the faith that Abraham had. Christ was the fulfillment of many of the prophecies of old, and those who were students of the scripture were expecting His coming. We read in Luke 3:15 "And as the people were in expectation, and all men mused in their hearts of John, whether he were the Christ, or not." (KJV)

Let us return to Heb.14. 4 "Seeing then that we have a great high priest" (KJV) Paul here brings out the point that Christ was "a great high priest" and further in Heb 7:17-21:-"You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek." (NIV) The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God. And it was not without an oath! Others became priests without any oath, but he became a priest with an oath when God said to him: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever.'" (NIV)

Melchizedek is first mentioned in Genesis 14:18-20: "Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram, saying, 'Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand.' Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything." (NIV) In these verses we see Melchizedek portrayed as both King of Salem and also as Priest of God Most High. The Hebrew word for God in this instance is the same as used in other places and rendered "God Almighty" in Genesis 17:1,(NIV) and "The Everlasting God" in Genesis 21:33 (KJV). Melchizedek worshipped the same God as Abraham who recognized him as a Priest.

Melchizedek appears next in Psalm 110:4 "The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek'." (NIV) This Psalm is of special interest because Jesus refers to it in Matt 22:44, Mark 12:36 and Luke 20:42-43 and it is regarded as one of the Messianic Psalms. It shows us that the ideal ruler of the Hebrew nation and thus all mankind would be one who can combine in his person both the role of Priest and King. Paul in Hebrews uses Melchizedek to show forth Jesus Christ as the final and perfect High Priest. Hebrews 5:7-10

"During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek." (NIV)

To show forth Jesus Christ as the final and perfect High Priest, Paul looks into the fact that the Levitical priesthood had failed, being unable to bring the people to God. Their sacrifices were only temporary, they could not bring eternal life, and only Christ with his more perfect sacrifice was able to bring about their reconciliation to God. Another argument that shows that Christ was the fulfillment of this prophecy in Psalm 110 is that he came out of Judah, a tribe that did not have any connection to the Levitical priesthood. While the claims of the old priesthood were based on genealogy, God ordained Christ's priesthood.

Paul also speaks of the High Priest Aaron, telling us how he was selected by God in Hebrews 5: 4 "No one takes this honor upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was... "(NIV) Aaron and his sons were chosen of God to be the priests to serve him. The Tribe of Levi was separated from all the tribes of Israel, separated and purified unto the Lord: Numbers 8:5-7- "The LORD said to Moses: 'Take the Levites from among the other Israelites and make them ceremonially clean. To purify them, do this: Sprinkle the water of cleansing on them; then have them shave their whole bodies and wash their clothes, and so purify themselves'." (NIV) Verse 11 "Aaron is to present the Levites before the LORD as a wave offering from the Israelites, so that they may be ready to do the work of the LORD". Verse 14 "In this way you are to set the Levites apart from the other Israelites, and the Levites will be mine". Verses 21-22 "The Levites purified themselves and washed their clothes. Then Aaron presented them as a wave offering before the LORD and made atonement for them to purify them". After that, the Levites came to do their work at the Tent of Meeting under the supervision of Aaron and his sons. They did with the Levites just as the LORD commanded Moses". The special position that Aaron held, that of High Priest, and the fact that he had been specially selected by God is shown in Numbers 17:6-8:- "And Moses spake unto the children of Israel, and every one of their princes gave him a rod apiece, for each prince one, according to their fathers' houses, even twelve rods: and the rod of Aaron was among their rods. And Moses laid up the rods before the LORD in the tabernacle of witness. And it came to pass, that on the morrow Moses went into the tabernacle of witness; and, behold, the rod of

Aaron for the house of Levi was budded, and brought forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds.” (KJV)

Later in Hebrews Paul tells us (Hebrews 7:11-12):- “If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the law was given to the people), why was there still need for another priest to come - one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law.” (NIV) This we realise happened at our Lord’s death and the rending of the veil of the temple. Thus was exposed the Most Holy, the area that only the High Priest on special occasions was allowed to enter. This brought to an end the sacrifices that the Levitical priesthood had performed, as well as bring to an end the Law Covenant as we are told Colossians 2:13-14:- “God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.” (NIV) They had served their purpose as we are told in Galatians 3:24-25 “Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster.” (KJV)

It is of interest that only a very few of the High Priests are mentioned, in the Bible, one who is mentioned is Eli who comforted Hannah when she went to the temple to pray for a male child. The result was a son, Samuel. 1 Samuel. 1:20; “So in the course of time Hannah conceived and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, ‘Because I asked the LORD for him’.” (NIV) Samuel was returned to the temple to serve God. The other high priest that is well known to all Bible Students, and certainly to the Hebrews to whom Paul wrote, was Caiaphas the high priest at the time of our Lord’s death. It was Caiaphas who issued the statement after our Lord had raised Lazarus “You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.” (John 11:50 NIV)

Paul introduces us to the subject of Christ as our high priest in Hebrews chapter 2. Let us turn to verses 9-10 “But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering”. (NIV) He is setting up his argument for the better high priest by first showing our Lord’s position when born on earth. John the Baptist also realized the position our Lord had when he said in Mark 1:7 “After me will

come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie”. (NIV)

This was then reinforced with the acknowledgement by God at Jesus’ baptism when he said “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:17) Paul then continues on in Hebrews 2:16 to remind them that he had descended to help mankind, “For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham’s descendants”. (NIV) He then tells us of his purpose in verses 17-18. “For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted”. (NIV) Paul then tells us in Hebrews 3:1 “Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess”. (NIV)

In chapter 4 of Hebrews, Paul brings out the point that our high priest has “passed into the heavens”(verse14 KJV) This seems to parallel with Aaron, and the High Priests that followed, who once a year went into the Most Holy Place in the temple to offer the blood of atonement in the presence of God. Christ has gone into the heavens to make intercession for us at the mercy seat of God, as the Son of God. Christ had fulfilled the first part of his priesthood on earth, that of dying for all mankind. The last part of our verse states “Let us hold fast our profession” or, as the NIV puts it, “Let us hold firmly to the faith we possess”. Here Paul exhorts us that as our High Priest has passed into the Heavens this should encourage us to hold firmly to our faith. Our Lord has gone ahead of us to prepare a place for us. He has not deserted us because he has trod the path showing us the way to the Heavenly Father.

Following on to verse 15,. Paul tells us “For we have not a High Priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities.” (KJV) Our High Priest is not cold and unfeeling. We have one who is abundantly qualified to sympathise with us in our afflictions and to whom therefore we may look for both aid and support in our trials as we try to follow in his footsteps. During his time on earth our Lord demonstrated this quality many times. The shortest verse in our Bible: John 11:35, (“Jesus wept”) is a famous verse showing his compassion to Mary and Martha at the death of Lazarus, showing the profound effect the death of one human being had on him. He also showed his distress over the entire nation of Israel in Matthew 23:37:- “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as

a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing", (NIV) Our Lord knew that their destruction for rejection of the son of God was near at hand.

Even in his most trying hour just before his death He showed compassion for his disciples at the garden of Gethsemane where he had gone to pray. We read in Matthew 26:43-44 "when he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time". (NIV) His compassion is shown vividly when he was on the cross, in agony and just before his death, when he turned to his disciple. "When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Dear woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home." (John 19:26-27.NIV)

Our Lord's tenderness and sympathy attract those of us who are weak or in need and his kindness does more than anything else to encourage those who have to encounter the difficulties and dangers of the narrow way. This is just as well when we realise what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:26-28: "Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things and the things that are not to nullify the things that are." (NIV) We realise that in ourselves we do not have the power to overcome the problems of our journey but must rely solely on the power of our Heavenly Father.

Paul then continues in Hebrew 4:15: "But (he) was in all points tempted like as we are" (KJV) or as the Diaglott puts it, "Tried in all respects". He was subject to all the kinds of trials to which we can be and he is therefore able to sympathise with us and to aid us. He was tempted in the literal sense, after his baptism at Jordan, as we are told in Matthew 4:1-3 "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him." (NIV) The first temptation was in respect to his God given powers; he was very hungry and there was no food available. The adversary suggested that he use his miraculous powers to make the stones become bread. This he could have done for we remember that on more than one occasion he miraculously provided food to feed the multitudes, and at another time he turned water into the choicest wines, but on this occasion he refused to use this power to satisfy his own hunger. He realised that the purpose for which

his father had led him into the wilderness was for prayer and meditation to prepare him for his sacrificial work.

The second temptation was to cast himself down from the pinnacle of the temple, thus calling the attention of all the people to him with his super human powers. The adversary knew that God had promised to protect him- Matthew 4:6-7:"If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered him, 'It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" (NIV) He refused to tempt God: the written word was his refuge and strength in every temptation.

We too, can be tempted to do things in a spirit of recklessness hoping that God will shield us from the results of a course that would be contrary to the law of nature, or to save us from consequences which would be the natural result of certain actions. This would be arrogant on the part of a child of God. Our bodies belong to the Lord and we have no right to do anything unnecessary which would be a risk of injury or death. Only duty or necessity would excuse such an action.

The final temptation of our Lord was one where he was offered control of all the kingdoms of Earth without the suffering, without taking the painful course set forth by his Heavenly Father. If he would just fall down and worship Satan, acknowledging his authority instead of Jehovah. Matthew 4:8-10: "Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" (NIV) So on every point the adversary was foiled. Jesus had as a shield the Word of God and was safe from attack.

This sort of temptation may come to us, we might be told that if only we were not so straight-laced but were to become more cooperative with the world and its spirit, we might get along better and have a greater influence on people. This was the adversary's argument with our Master - cooperate with me and we will bring the whole world to great blessings. We see some church systems compromising their standards to fit in with worldly notions and with the government of the day, trying to curry favour using the excuse that if they do this they will be more in tune with the people and more will attend. In doing so, the word of God has to be watered down or rejected, so we too have to be careful that we do not compromise our beliefs in order to be popular. We too have to say 'get thee

hence Satan, we worship our Father in heaven, and Him only will we serve'..

Our Lord in the literal sense was also persecuted, he was poor, he was despised, he suffered bodily pain, he endured the sorrows of a lingering and most cruel death, that of the cross. In Matthew 8:20, the Lord tells us "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." (NIV) There were times when he was tired, there were times when he felt he was let down by his disciples, by the nation of Israel and by the Scribes and Pharisees. This culminated in Mark 11:15-18 "On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations"? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'" The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him." (NIV)

Our Lord could have been tempted to return evil for evil, our Lord was so tempted just before his crucifixion when he was delivered to the high priests and taken before the Jewish Sanhedrin. He could have shown them up with his knowledge of the scriptures, he could have delivered a scathing attack on the High Priest at that time and he might truthfully have made comment on his character and those of the Scribes and Pharisees. We know He had the eloquence of speech as we are told in John 7:44-46 "And some of them would have taken him; but no man laid hands on him. Then came the officers to the chief priests and Pharisees; and they said unto them, Why have ye not brought him? The officers answered, never man spake like this man". (KJV) He did not use his eloquence to defend himself but held his peace and allowed himself as a lamb to be lead to the slaughter. We too can be tempted to render evil for evil, but we are told "Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good." Romans 12:20-21(KJV)

In the garden of Gethsemane it appears that Jesus felt momentarily that he did not have the strength to go on- Matthew. 26:39: "Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.' However we know that the Father provided all our Lord's needs and will provide ours also. Our Lord passed all the tests, as it says "yet without sin" or "without yielding to sin". He steadfastly refused to yield to any appeals from his flesh to escape or to lessen his suffering. 1 Peter 2:21-

23: "Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps... He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to Him who judges justly." (NIV) Paul also states further in Hebrews 7:26: "he was holy, harmless, undefiled" (KJV) -The great High Priest of our Christian profession was without sin, thus able to assist those of us who are sinners and who put our trust in him.

Now let us turn to the last verse of our opening scripture, Hebrews 4:16: "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need". (NIV) What a beautiful expression "the throne of grace!" How many times have we used this expression in our prayers to our Heavenly Father. A throne is the seat of sovereignty, the seat of power; but a throne of grace is designed to represent a sovereign seated to dispense mercy and pardon. This was first pictured in the temple service where God is represented as seated in the most holy place on the mercy seat. The Jewish high priest approached that seat or throne of divine majesty with the blood of the atonement to make intercession for the people and to plead for pardon.

In the case of the Great High Priest, Christ, having shed his own blood to make atonement for our sins has made it possible for us to come before the throne with boldness, not because of our own merit but through Christ. We are assured that God is merciful and we therefore come without hesitation or trembling to ask for all the mercy that we need. But not only does God offer us mercy, but also grace, i.e. favour, strength, help, counsel, direction, support for the various duties and trials of life as we venture up the narrow way. We have the privilege that we may come before God and ask through our Lord Jesus for all the strength, direction, and support that we need with the assurance given here by Paul, "If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" Rom. 8:31-32: (KJV)

Let us take a final look at our opening verses in Hebrews 4:14-16 "Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need. (KJV)

Amen.

(RC:06)

BUTTERFLIES—a reflection

Butterflies are among the most beautiful insects in God's creation. But the most significant thing about them is their metamorphosis - the transformation they undergo to become such beautiful creatures.

After they hatch from the egg butterflies begin life as a larva or caterpillar. They eat constantly and grow rapidly into an enormous, not very attractive, grub. They attach themselves to a twig and form a hard outer shell called a chrysalis. The chrysalis is often camouflaged to offer protection from predators while the unattractive slow crawling caterpillar is being transformed inside into a beautiful flying butterfly.

This transformation lends itself so well to an analogy of our transformation in Christ. One analogy is the protective hard shell of the chrysalis compared with the protective spiritual armour we must put on to guard against spiritual predators. However, the more appealing analogy is the *invisible* change that takes place *inwardly*; the transformation of something unattractive to something of beauty. But what does this transformation involve for us?

Romans 12:2 urges us *not* to allow our character to embrace the unattractive elements of the world, but to be a part of the beautiful things. “*Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God.*”

This thought is expressed similarly in Ephesians 4:22-24. “*Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.*”

There are two elements to this. Firstly, we must not conform to this world by embracing the unattractive things. “*For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.*” (1 John. 2:16).

Secondly, the renewing of our minds - changing our thinking. This is not simply changing our thoughts, but it is actually *putting off* our old thoughts and actions, as well as *putting on* God's thoughts.

This same sentiment is expressed as a positive instruction in Philippians 4:8 “*... whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.*”

This change is something that takes place *inwardly*, because whatever controls our thinking controls our lives. In our caterpillar stage, we allow Satan to influ-

ence our thinking because we are immersed in our human emotions and therefore can only react from a frail human perspective. While we are in this stage, it is difficult for us, especially through trials, to always be a genuine and true witness for Christ. The witness that people remember the most, is not what we say but what we do, which is motivated by our inward thoughts.

So we have to learn to react, and to see all things that happen to us, from God's perspective. That requires a real mind shift. The most important reason for mind renewal is that if there is no mind change, then there is no life change. For us to transform completely to the butterfly stage, we have to take on the *mind of Christ*, so that there is an outward manifestation of our inward transformation!

What a challenge! How do we acquire the mind of Christ? Perhaps a starting point might be to take on His mantle of true humility. Philippians 2:3-5 instructs us to “*Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.*”

So once we have adopted Christ's example, we can rejoice with the words - “*If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come.*” (2 Cor.5:17)

But unlike the butterfly, whose transformation is a one-off event, we must ensure that we work at staying in tune with Christ in our transformed stage and not slip back to the unattractive stage.

So we must focus on the butterfly, not the caterpillar. We do this by following the words of Romans. 12:1. “*I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.*”

(All quotations above are from the RSV)

Albert Orsbom wrote:

*Let the beauty of Jesus be seen in me,
All His wonderful passion and purity;
O Thou Spirit divine,
All my nature refine,
Till the beauty of Jesus be seen in me.*

LOVE ...IS BETTER THAN SACRIFICE

The Apostle Paul's statement - *"though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing"* (1 Cor. 13:3 KJV) - might have been more meaningful to the church at Corinth than it is to us today.

The offering of animal sacrifices has been part of Man's religious worship since very early times. Genesis 4:4 records Abel bringing *"of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof"*. *"Bringing of the fat"* infers that Abel had killed the lamb and brought it as an offering unto the Lord. In Genesis 8:20 we read that Noah, after the flood, *"builded an altar unto the Lord; and took of every clean beast, and of every clean fowl, and offered burnt offerings on the altar"*. Genesis 31:54 records Jacob *"offering sacrifice"* upon the mount when he separated from Laban, and Genesis 46:1-3 records that later he offered sacrifices to God at Beersheba before *"he went down into Egypt"*.

Israel accustomed to sacrifices

Consequently it is not surprising that, when God commissioned Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, He told Moses to say to Pharaoh - *"The Lord God of the Hebrews hath met with us: and now let us go, we beseech thee, three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God."* (Exodus 3:18) Pharaoh refused Moses' request, but Moses and Aaron persisted and repeated their request to Pharaoh. (Exodus 5:3, 8) Finally, when Pharaoh agreed to the Israelites leaving Egypt, Moses contended with Pharaoh to allow them to take their herds so that they could continue to offer their sacrifices: *"Pharaoh called unto Moses, and said, 'Go ye, serve the Lord, only let your flocks and your herds be stayed; ... And Moses said, 'Thou must give us also sacrifices and burnt offerings, that we may sacrifice unto the Lord our God. Our cattle also shall go with us ...'"* (Exodus 10:24-26)

With this aspect of Israel's history in mind, we see that the idea of sacrificing lambs at the passover was not, in itself, unfamiliar to them, although the sprinkling of the blood on the door posts and lintels was new. (Exodus 12:1-11) The annual observance of the passover sacrifice - *"this day shall be unto you for a memorial; and ye shall keep it a feast to the Lord throughout your generations: ye shall keep it a feast by an ordinance for ever"* (Exodus 12:14) further engrained the offering of sacrifices into their culture.

Consistent with this background, the Israelites were required to *"... build an altar unto the Lord thy God ... and offer burnt offerings thereon unto the Lord thy God"* when they entered the promised land. (Deut. 27:1 - 7)

The Law Covenant added numerous other burnt offerings to the customs and obligations of the nation of Israel. (Exodus 20:24; 23:14-19) Burnt offerings were required when the priests were anointed, (Exodus 29) and on other occasions the Israelites were to offer voluntary sacrifices. (Leviticus 1:10; 22:18-21)

The Gentile nations

The Gentiles also had a history of offering sacrifices to

their gods. In Exodus 34:12 - 17 we read that God instructed Moses to *"take heed to thyself, lest thou make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land whither thou goest, lest it be for a snare in the midst of thee. But ye shall destroy their altars, break their images, and cut down their groves. For thou shalt worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God, lest thou make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land and they go a whoring after their gods, and do sacrifice unto their gods, and one call thee, and thou eat of his sacrifice".*

And so it seems that offering sacrifices was an inherent desire (or need) of both Israelite and Gentile, at least of that era. Whether the desire was inherent or not, it is evident that the offering of sacrifices was well engrained in their culture.

That offering sacrifices was still being practised when Paul wrote to the Corinthian church is evidenced by the fact that the Corinthian brethren had written to Paul seeking direction regarding *"the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols..."*. (1 Cor. 8:4). So prevalent was the practice that the surplus was offered for sale *"in the shambles"*. (1 Cor. 10:25)

Martyrdom

Offering an animal sacrifice was a gruesome ceremony - it terminated a life, albeit a life of the brute creation. Of much greater moment is the sacrifice of human life. Many human lives have been terminated in war and by other acts of homicide; others have been terminated because of one's conviction that it was contrary to God's will for them to comply with the forces of evil. Such is martyrdom. Many Faithful of old were called upon to pay the supreme sacrifice in testimony to their faith in God, as we read in Hebrews 11:37: *"... they were stoned, ... sawn asunder, ... and slain with the sword ..."*. Martyrdom introduces another dimension to sacrificing - not just the spilling of animal blood but the sacrifice (laying down) of human life. Martyrdom is on a level well above the sacrifice of animals. Notwithstanding the drama and agony associated with animal sacrifices, and the tremendous courage and faith necessary to enable one to suffer martyrdom, the Apostle Paul tells the Corinthian brethren that *"though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing"*.

Is it possible for us to fully comprehend how important it is for us to develop the fruit of love? It surpasses the offering of all animal sacrifices, and it also surpasses even the greatest sacrifice Man can offer, that of giving his or her own life.

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